

Message Text

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ACTION NEA-10

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 CIAE-00 DODE-00 NSAE-00 NSCE-00
SSO-00 USIE-00 INRE-00 PM-04 H-01 INR-07 L-03
NSC-05 PA-01 PRS-01 SP-02 SS-15 OMB-01 /051 W
-----241028Z 072974 /20

O 240856Z MAR 77
FM AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI
TO SECSTATE WASHDC NIACT IMMEDIATE 2099
INFO AMCONSUL BOMBAY
AMCONSUL CALCUTTA
AMCONSUL MADRAS

C O N F I D E N T I A L NEW DELHI 4161

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: PINR IN PINT
SUBJECT: NEW INDIAN PRIME MINISTER: MORARJI DESAI

REF: STATE 064408

1. WITH ANNOUNCEMENT AT 1230 LOCAL TIME THAT MORARJI DESAI HAS BEEN SELECTED BY JANATA PARTY AS NEW PRIME MINISTER, FOLLOWING IS SUMMARY OF DESAI'S BACKGROUND AS REQUESTED REFTEL.

2. AFTER A NUMBER OF YEARS IN RELATIVE POLITICAL OBLIVION, MORARJI DESAI REEMERGED AS A MAJOR PLITICAL FIGURE IN JUNE 1975 WHEN HIS THREAT TO "FAST UNTO DEATH" FORCED THE PRIME MINISTER TO LIFT PRESIDENTIAL RULE AND ORDER ELECTIONS IN GUJARAT IN JUNE 1975. WHEN THE EMERGENCY WAS DECLARED LATER THAT MONTH, DESAI WAS IMPRISONED AND HELD UNTIL THE ANNOUNCEMENT OF NATIONAL ELECTION ON JANUARY 18, 1977. WHEN THE JANATA PARTY WAS FORMED, HE WAS UNANIMOUSLY NAMED ITS CHAIRMAN AND IN THE JUST- CONCLUDED ELECTION WAS RETURNED TO THE HOUSE FROM THE SURAT CONSTITUENCY FOR THE FIFTH TIME.

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3. IDEOLOGY AND POLICIES: POLITICALLY DESAI IS COMMITTED TO DEMOCRACY, WHICH HE DESCRIBED AS THE ONLY SYSTEM CONDUCIVE TO HUMAN VALUES. THERE IS A STRONG GANDHIAN MORAL OVERTONE TO ALL HIS VIEWS. WHILE FRIENDLY TO THE WEST, DESAI HAS OCCASIONALLY BEEN CRITICAL OF THE US E.G., IN 1971 FOR ITS SUPPORT OF PAKISTAN. HE HAS CONSISTENTLY TAKEN A HARD LINE TOWARD PAKISTAN BUT HAS ON VARIOUS OCCASIONS OPPOSED

DEALING WITH THE PROBLEM MILITARILY AS CONTRARY TO GANDHIAN VALUES. HE HAS STRONGLY OPPOSED INDIAN COMMUNISTS AND HAS CRITICIZED INDIAN POLICY AS BEING TILTED TOWARD THE SOVIET UNION.

4. ON DOMESTIC ECONOMIC POLICY DESAI IS KNOWN TO EMPHASIZE RURAL DEVELOPMENT AND THE DREATION OF VILLAGE INDUSTRIES. THIS DOES NOT, HOWEVER, MAKE HIM AN OPPONENT OF INDUSTRIALIZATION-- HIS SERVICE AS GOI FINANCE MINISTER WOULD ARGUE TO THE CONTRARY. DURING THAT PERIOD INDIAN INDUSTRIALISTS CONSIDERED MORARJI MUCH MORE FAVORABLY INCLINED TOWARD THE PRIVATE SECTOR THAN NEHRU AND OTHER GOI LEADERS . HIS MORAL VIEWS, HOWEVER, ARE CRITICAL OF SOME ELEMENTS OF FREE ENTERPRISE. HE MAY NOW FAVOR A GREATER EMPHASIS ON THE PRIVATE SECTOR. HE WAS, OF COURSE, DEEPLY INVOLVED IN THE MANAGEMENT OF US ECONOMIC ASSISTANCE TO INDIA, BUT HE NOW ALSO SPEAKS OF THE INTRUSISIVE ASPECTS OF FOREIGN AID.

5. PERSONAL TRAITS: DESAI, POPURLALY KNOWN AS MORARJIBHA OR JUST MORARJI, HAS A REPUTATION FOR MORAL UPRIGHTNES (OR SELF-RIGHTEOUSNESS) AND RIGIDITY. HE HAS OFTEN STUBBORNLY PURSUED PET FADS SUCH AS ENFORCEMENT OF PROHIBITION. AS A GANDHIAN, DESAI AFFECTS A FRUGAL, SPARTAN STANDARD OF LIVING BUT DOES NOT EXCLUDE ALL WESTERN COMFORTS, SUCH AS AIR-CONDITIONING. HE IS A YOGA ENTHUSIATS AND DOES RITUAL SPINNING IN THE STYLE OF GANDHI. HE HAS CONSISTENTLY REFUSED INNOCULAIONS AND TRAVELS ABROAD WITHOUT HEALTH CERTIFICATE.

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6. ACCUSATIONS HAVE BENN MADE IN THE PAST THAT HIS SON, KANTI, EXPLOITED HIS FATHER'S POSITIONS TO AMMASS A PERSONAL FORTUNE. DESAI IS ACUTELY SENSITIVE TO SUCH ACCUSATIONS. WHEN A JANATA PARTY VISITOR RECENTLY CALLED ON HIM AND JOKINGLY REFERRED TO KANTI AS "SANJAY DESAI" HE WAS SUMMARILY INVITED OUT.

7. DESAI HAS TRAVELED WIDELY, INCLUDING THE US, EGYPT, AFRICA, LATIN AMERICA, USSR, JAPAN AND WESTERN EUROPE, BUT NOT IN THE LAST DECADE. HIS VIEWS ON FOREIGN POLICY ARE ALSO NOTED IN NEW DELHI 3944 AND 4044.

8. CURRICULUM VITAE: BORN ON FEBRUARY 29, 1896, IN A VILLAGE IN BULSAR DISTRICT IN WHAT IS NOW GUJARAT STATE, DESAI WAS EDUCATED AT WILSON COLLEGE IN BOMBAY. HE MARRIED GAJRABEN DESAI IN 1911 AND HAS ONE SON AND ONE DAUGHTER. HE SPEAKS GUJARATI, HINDI AND FLUENT ENGLISH.

9. POLITICAL CAREER: DESAI JOINED THE BOMBAY GOVERNMENT

SERVICE IN 1918 BUT RESIGNED IN 1930 TO JOIN THE CIVIL DESOBEDIENCE MOVEMENT. BETWEEN 1930-34, 1940-41, AND 1942-45 DESAI WAS FREQUENTLY IMPRISONED. BEGINNING IN 1937 HE HELD VARIOUS MINISTERIAL POSTS IN BOMBAY INCLUDING CHIEF MINISTER OF THE STATE FROM 1952-56. FROM 1956 UNTIL 1958 HE SERVED IN THE CENTRAL GOVERNMENT CABINET AS MINISTER FOR COMMERCE AND INDUSTRY. FROM 1958 TO 1963 HE SERVED AS GOI FINANCE MINISTER, UNTIL HE WAS EASED OUT OF THE CABINET BY NEHRU UNDER THE KAMARAJ PLAN, WHICH REQUIRED THAT SENIOR MINISTERS RESIGN TO ACCEPT PARTY WORK. HE RETURNED TO THE CENTER IN 1967 AS DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER AND MINISTER OF FINANCE BUT RESIGNED IN 1969 WHEN MRS. GANDHI DEPRIVED HIM OF THE FINANCE PORTFOLIO. SINCE THE CONGRESS SPLIT LATER THAT YEAR UNTIL THE LOK SABHA WAS DISSOLVED THIS YEAR, DESAI HAS BEEN THE CHAIRMAN OF THE OPPOSITION CONGRESS

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PARLIAMENTARY PARTY. AFTER 1969 DESAI BECAME A BITTER OPPONENT OF MRS. GANDHI, LABELING HER A "FASCIST" INTENT ONLY IN INCREASING HER OWN POWER.

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Message Attributes

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